

*Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*, by Jeffrey J. Kripal. University of Chicago Press. 320 pages, 4 halftones, hb., 2010, \$37.50, ISBN-13: 9780226453866; pb., 2011, \$22.50, ISBN-13: 9780226453873.

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*Authors of the Impossible* continues Jeffrey Kripal's explorations into popular expressions of mystical phenomena. It originated during the writing of his forthcoming *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal*, an examination of how paranormal phenomena such as human flight and telekinesis hold a prominent position in contemporary Western culture through the popular artistic genres of science-fiction and superheroes. Kripal became interested in several authors whom he considered to have had a particular influence on these "modern mythologies" (6), yet were largely neglected by contemporary religious scholarship. Despite different starting points and a period of more than a century, he considers their work to come to the same essential conclusion—that humans have potentials that remain untapped in the majority of individuals, but which find expression in both psychological phenomena and the popular imagination.

Case studies of these authors form the basis of this book, and I suspect that it is these chapters that readers of this journal will find most interesting. The first concerns Frederic Myers, a classicist who in 1882 founded the Society for Psychical Research, an organisation dedicated to the scientific investigation of Spiritualist phenomena. Although the SPR dismissed most of the reports they received, a small number were accepted as genuine. As a result, Myers developed the theory that these anomalous phenomena were evidence that humanity was still in a larval phase, developing towards a full maturity where such abilities would be commonplace.

The American researcher Charles Fort, from whom we get the term *Fortean*, made a career of compiling of anomalous events such as rains of fish and disappearing people. In 1919's *Book of the Damned*, Fort set out to demonstrate that phenomena which challenge our conception of reality do indeed happen. Kripal is convincing in portraying him as a forerunner of a post-modern epistemology where knowledge is temporary and relative. In his later books, Fort developed the position that humanity was being influenced from the future; in other words, these weird phenomena were harbingers of normalcy to come.

Kripal then turns to Jacques Valleé, one of the first academics to take the UFO phenomenon seriously. Having spent years working for the US air force researching UFO sightings, in 1965 he commenced a series of books which would challenge and ultimately help redefine how the UFO phenomenon was understood, by sceptics and contactees equally. He was the first to explicitly state that the UFO phenomenon itself was not new, only its interpretation in terms of spaceships, a pertinent example here being his account of the series of visions that commenced in May 1917, in Fátima, Portugal, an event which Kripal himself recounts in an afterword to the main book. Valleé was also the first to suggest that UFOs may not be from space at all, and in *Passport to Magonia* (1969), he suggests that UFOs are neither entirely material nor entirely imaginary, but operate somewhere in between, in the nexus of the physical world and the subjective world.

Although best known for his work in the fields of sociology and philosophy, Bertrand Méheust's early work was concerned with the mythical aspects of UFOs. Like Valleé, he came to the conclusion that human consciousness is an irreducibly part of the UFO phenomenon, even while UFOs have some kind of physical existence. He concluded that reality possesses both an exoteric face, consisting of matter and causality, and an esoteric face concerned with information and meaning. Much of his later work was an attempt to demonstrate that Western thinking had suppressed the exoteric aspect of reality over the preceding two centuries, primarily through his examination of the eighteenth and nineteenth century European Magnetism movement, *Somnambulisme et médiumnité* (1999).

As with his 2007 work *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion*, Kripal does a good job of placing these thinkers in their historical context, and of tracing intellectual currents which have hitherto received little scholarly attention. It is very readable, particularly in the chapters on Valleé and Fort, which are detailed, well-researched and vividly recounted. Occasionally, however, there are uncomfortable lurches of tone from the academic to the colloquial, with Kripal peppering the text with his own reactions to what he has just written. For example;

Like a Hindu goddess, Eusapia grew numerous arms, weird plasmic protrusions whose shadows on the ceiling Mrs. Myers described as resembling a dressed arm (complete with sleeve and cuff), the neck of a swan, and a stump. (52)

Another strength of this book is in Kripal's assertion that psychical and paranormal phenomena deserved greater academic attention from scholars of religion. Although the situation is beginning to change, popular expressions

of religious, spiritual and/or mystical phenomena—and, conversely, expressions of such phenomena within popular culture—have not traditionally received serious and sustained attention from academic scholars of religion. Kripal's project, in this respect, is most welcome.

In *Esalen*, he wrote of attempting a “synthesising of the spiritual and scientific, of wonder and reason” (2007, 13). Similarly, in *Authors of the Impossible*, Kripal's central argument is that there is some reality to paranormal experiences which scientific studies of religion must attempt to incorporate. Kripal seems to believe that such a suggestion will lead to new approaches and methodologies, but it is difficult to see how his supposedly radical proposition is different from a *sui generis* essentialism in which an irreducible and ineffable *sacred* is inaccessible to the outsider. At a time when Religious Studies is struggling to establish itself as a legitimate scientific discipline, based on empiricism and distinct from Theology, Kripal's assertion seems rather unhelpful. *Authors of the Impossible*, despite its ground-breaking subject matter, is ultimately an example of Eliadian Comparative Religion.

Indeed, dotted through the text are hints that Kripal's unspoken purpose is a critique of the objective scientific study of religions itself. What else can we take from the assertion that Méheust “knew that in order to get a university position... he would have to mask his real thoughts”, or that “he put aside all of his bold speculations and true convictions and hid them behind the mask of scholarship and objectivity” (215)? Such a charge requires a more robust critique than is found here, and as such would have been best left out.

These methodological issues aside, there is a solid core of interesting and much-needed historical material here, and this book will find a deserved place in many academic libraries as a result.



